PURDUE UNIVERSITY

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture
ISSN 1481-4374
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

Volume 15 (2013) Issue 7 Article 2

Positive Uncertainty and the Ethos of Comparative Literature

Brigitte Le Juez
Dublin City University

Recommended Citation

Le Juez, Brigitte. "Positive Uncertainty and the Ethos of Comparative Literature." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 15.7 (2013): <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2376>

PURDUE UNIVERSITY PRESS <http://www.thepress.purdue.edu>

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

ISSN 1481-4374 <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series.* Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 15 Issue 7 (December 2013) Article 2
Brigitte Le Juez,
"Positive Uncertainty and the Ethos of Comparative Literature"
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss7/2>

Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*** **15.7 (2013)**
Special Issue ***New Work in Comparative Literature in Europe*****.**
Ed. Marina Grishakova, Lucia Boldrini, and Matthew Reynolds
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss7/>

Abstract: In her article "Positive Uncertainty and the Ethos of Comparative Literature" Brigitte Le Juez examines the continuous difficulty comparatists have with the lack of definition of the discipline and explores possible new avenues for tackling the problem. Le Juez argues that "uncertainty" recognized as a tenet of comparative literature should not be unheeded, but embraced in order to shift the focus from the idea that comparative objects and methods are the defining elements of the discipline and envisage them as the aims and results of an ethos. Le Juez posits that when "indiscipline" and "serendipity" are added to the notion of uncertainty, creativity is revealed as the essential characteristic of comparative literature.

Brigitte LE JUEZ

Positive Uncertainty and the Ethos of Comparative Literature

Since its inception, from a certain sense of unease among its practitioners to the sharp criticism by some of the best theoreticians within the discipline, the main fault attributed to comparative literature regarding its nature has been formulated on the idea of indefiniteness, of uncertainty: "What is comparative literature?" is the ceaselessly reiterated question that leaves comparatists perplexed and divided. Attempts at addressing it have so far proven unsatisfactory, the answers provided being deemed controversial or insufficient. Some volumes have used this question not so much to bring a clear answer as to give a panorama of perspectives, thus reinforcing the impression of a blur. For instance, in their 1983 *Qu'est-ce que la littérature comparée?* Pierre Brunel, Claude Pichois, and André-Michel Rousseau look at comparative literature's origins and its objects of study and offer a cautious definition of comparative literature. At the same time they express a fear that the discipline has become increasingly obscure and that this opacity might come from the discipline's tendency to embrace too much: all the literatures in all languages from all countries in the world and even all forms of expressions both intra- and para-literary (7). This sense of grappling with the discipline's scope remains widespread among comparatists.

From Susan Bassnett's polemical 1993 *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* to the 2006 *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* annual report of the American Comparative Literature Association (Saussy) these concerns have been variably addressed and added to. Comparative literature's demise was announced many times and equally multifarious rebirths have been identified, in one case even as "a triumph" (Saussy, "Exquisite"). Many collections of articles have in good faith, but unsuccessfully, attempted to offer a clear description of comparative literature. One recent volume — the 2009 *Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature* (Damrosch, Melas, Buthelezi) — makes no such claim and proposes instead "to look deeply into the discipline's history and its present possibilities" in order to "help readers navigate a rapidly evolving discipline in a dramatically changing world" (back cover). Looking ahead may be a way of debating the thorny question of the comparative approach without insisting on a consensus. However, the tacit recognition that comparative literature's object and method are still eschewing definition may not satisfy comparatists who feel the need for a delineation of their domain — not to mention that this delay has over time eroded the discipline's credibility in the eyes of potential new recruits and decision-makers at the institutional level (on this, see, e.g., Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári).

Nonetheless, the search for an explicit designation is for many not the best way to approach comparative literature. In 1959 René Wellek felt that an "artificial demarcation of subject matter and methodology, a mechanistic concept … [were] the symptoms of the long-drawn-out crisis of comparative literature" (167). More recently, Lucia Boldrini points out that comparative literature "is a discipline that refuses to take itself for granted, that is constantly self-aware and constantly calls into question the premises on which it operates" (21). Although this ability to escape the confinement of a fixed definition may be seen as fitting to a discipline of the humanities, the sense of vagueness it carries is sometimes viewed as a detrimental trait. Uncertainty is indeed generally and negatively associated with incomplete knowledge or limited understanding of a subject. This is ironic considering that literary criticism, interpretation, and related concepts such as reception, adaptation, or hybridization — which are at the heart of the comparative enterprise —negate any possible conclusive reading of texts. Is this not the appeal of comparative literature? Have comparatists not always fought against rigidly exclusive systems of thought? Thus I posit that uncertainty is in the very nature of comparative studies and ought to be embraced as the way to consider comparative literature as an ethos.

Looking back to the nineteenth century, we notice that the first comparatists, unwittingly or not, established uncertainty as a fundamental principle of their new discipline. Hugó Meltzl de Lomnitz in 1877 recognized the difficulty of defining the then emerging field of comparative literature, and proposed elements that he saw as essential, and that would become corner stones for the field. He wished that his comparative literature journal — *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* — the first of its kind, should on the one hand explore new ideas such as the role of translation and the

importance of polyglotism, while on the other exclude "the established disciplines" which in his opinion "serve, openly or not, only practical purposes" (43). He meant his publication to be a "meeting place of authors, translators and philosophers of all nations" (43) who would join him and work together to establish the balance necessary to a global library. His ideal was open, inclusive, and devoid of method (on Meltzl de Lomnitz see Marno). In 1886 Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett put emphasis on the need for extensiveness, promoting comparative study as a scientific tool with which to explore and analyze cultural dissimilarities and correspondences world wide according to their historical, literary, and social circumstances. He gave equally undifferentiated attention to all cultures and all genres and defended the need for an objective analysis which would function through mixed perspectives. As David Damrosch observes, "Posnett's methods were in some respects diametrically opposed to Meltzl's: he worked on his own rather than with a group, amassing a mountain of evidence through wide and somewhat random reading, relying often on translation rather than concerning himself with polyglotism" (105). However, Posnett's approach was driven by the same sense of impartial discovery as Meltzl de Lomnitz's, and, interestingly, he did not have a stable system of enquiry either. Uncertainty, therefore, with regard to early comparative practice, could be defined as one of the central, yet unnamed, precepts for unsystematic, positive exploration of universal literature.

Having underlined the open-mindedness and randomness of approaches which uphold implicitly the principle of uncertainty, Damrosch proposes that Meltzl de Lomnitz's and Posnett's models of genuinely global comparativism should be heeded today (99, 110). Yet, in the introduction to *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature*, editors Damrosch, Natalie Melas, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi observe that although comparatists now rejoice in the freedom of transcultural and transdisciplinary choices at their disposal, the continued development of new possible approaches sometimes proves complex when attempting to solve conceptual challenges (ix). The definition of methods goes with the identification of specific theories, which can be desirable when it helps provide goals and standards, but can prove a hindrance when its explanatory models become norms, which then cancel the required openness identified as the principal quality of comparative literature. Here lies the discipline's essential dilemma: on the one hand, the multiplicity of approaches and the occasional discrepancies between them feed the perception of fuzziness around comparative literature; on the other, as the primary principles indicate, all approaches have their validity and can prove complementarily productive. Therefore, while the wish to pin down a specific methodology is understandable, the theoretical delineation of the comparative domain has so far proved impossible.

Methodology is, by definition, a systematic study, a scientific practice according to specific research methods following an ordered set of logical rules and steps as a way to arrive at a result, and this was not what was recommended by forerunners of comparative literature. Two questions immediately spring to mind. First, is it possible to determine the "result" of a literary study before beginning one's research? One could argue that some theories already force scholars to do so, when they dominate the enquiry and literary texts are no longer read for their own sake, but manipulated to serve as illustrations. Second, could or should there ever be unanimity around a methodology? Since this has failed to happen in the last two centuries, the need for a different perspective is now obvious. The search for an identifiable method is not to be dismissed as ill-conceived because it partly comes from a well-meaning sense that unity is lacking among comparatists. However, it may seem that comparatists have lost sight of their own values which, rather than procedures, could constitute the focus around which they might unite.

It is clear that comparatists have agreed to get rid of all "schools" and "-centrisms" which in the past spoiled the concerted effort of working without boundaries of any kind. It is also clear that comparatists have agreed on basic ideals relating to democracy, freedom of thought and expression, responsibility, and humanism. Yet, as Tzvetan Todorov deplores in his 2006 *La Littérature en péril*, syllabi are often based on pre-set critical tools and not on the reading of literature itself. The effect is that, instead of inspiring learners to reflect on the human condition or on human emotions, reading becomes a means to reflect mostly on theoretical notions, and he asks: "which is the aim, and which is the means?" (Todorov 19; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). Since comparatists are also trained in this way, it is no wonder that they often wrestle with their own discipline which neither offers established processes nor identifies with a specific methodology. Away from all practical considerations — whether economic, pedagogical, or research-led — it is time for comparatists to

consider that the generous, if unruly, spirit of comparative literature is a disposition to be endorsed and not resisted.

It may appear that these ideals would be badly served by an uncertain, albeit positive, approach. Yet, positive uncertainty may well elicit some solutions. Indeed, the concept has already been developed scientific fields. In career guidance, for instance, as championed by H.B. Gelatt, it helps people to be flexible, to take into account the complexity of their situation, to consider several solutions simultaneously using different criteria, and they must have a non-deterministic, multifactorial approach so that the project becomes personal, freed from habits, conditioning, and prejudices. Hydrologists consider positive uncertainty as a method to "address … research questions in an honest and robust way … 'Positive uncertainty' urges moving beyond deterministic frameworks of the past, but doing so not by regrettably accepting that uncertainties are inevitable, but by positively thriving in the new perspectives that accompany this recognition" (Juston, Kauffeldt, Quesada Montano, Seibert, Beven, Westerberg 1117). In the field of geography (specifically in urban architecture), uncertainty is considered an intrinsic social phenomenon and deemed positive because it leads to the determination of innovative propositions and strategies. It amends the rules of planning and the use of tools that become multitextual and flexible, according to a multiscalar (i.e., looking at global, continental, national, regional or local levels) and interdisciplinary approach (see, e.g., Pellegrino <http://www.carnetsdegeographes.org/carnets_soutenances/sout_01_14_Pellegrino.php>). The list could continue with examples in education, psychology, or mathematics, which all have a constructive view of positive uncertainty and ways of applying it fruitfully. So, why is it that comparatists are most ill-at-ease with what is an essential component of scientific research, a component that requires the application of greater objectivity and that leads to a variety of innovative approaches and that their counterparts in other sciences feel helps them reach results which are representative of humanity and its environment? Is this not the purpose of literary analysis? What is more, do the positive aspects identified here not meet some of the crucial features of the comparative ethos including flexibility, interdisciplinarity, multitextuality, multifactoriality, diversity, and imagination?

Imagination might be less welcome by researchers looking to apply a reliably precise and realistic theoretical model. So it is important to remind ourselves that imagination is at the heart of the comparative stance, that it has been identified before as a desirable facet of literary research: "Literary scholarship becomes an act of the imagination, like art itself, and thus a preserver and creator of the highest values of mankind" (Wellek 171). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak also put forward the importance of imagination in tackling such questions as that of human rights through literary investigation (see also McClennen and Morello). Spivak argues that it should be the role of "responsible comparativism" to help train the imagination and, to that effect, "approach culturally diversified ethical systems diachronically, through the history of multicultural empires, without foregone conclusions" (12-13). Imagination is part and parcel of objectivity and fairness, as well as sensibility and responsibility. But how is that to be achieved if not by adhering to an ethos, rather than a method?

In their introduction to their 1989 *Précis de littérature comparée* Pierre Brunel and Yves Chevrel expressed the hope that their volume would in the image of the discipline be both "multifarious and unique" and asserted that "comparative literature has indeed the ambition to open onto an all-encompassing humanism" (9-10). Wellek encouraged comparatists to consider the ethics of comparative literature as a possible solution, selecting as its rallying point the study of the unity of humanity as it is expressed in transnational and transhistorical artistic models (this idea is also found in Claudio Guillén's work). Wellek refers to ethics as the study and development of standards (also evoked in Spivak's wish). This is an essential aspect in the refinement of a comparative ethos since established methods and therefore rules and norms can deviate according to circumstances and objectives. Standards, then, must not only be clear but well-founded. Ethics, in this sense, include the continuous assurance that comparative ideals do not stray as has happened in the past. For instance, while "Comparative literature arose as a reaction against the narrow nationalism of much nineteenth-century scholarship, as a protest against the isolationism of many historians … of literature" (Wellek 164) owing to historico-political circumstances it was practiced in a way that "led to a strange system of cultural bookkeeping, a desire to accumulate credits for one's nation by proving as many influences

as possible on other nations" (Wellek 167). From this outlook, it can be surmised that the definition of the fundamental principles of comparative literature is vital to the preservation of comparative literature. But how is it possible to implement these tenets and thus agree on a comparative ethos? So far we have seen that requirements would include agreeing on the idea that comparison must not serve practical purposes and that it necessitates bringing together various disciplines and working without boundaries of any kind in order to achieve specific ethical standards.

The practical question certainly needs to be addressed because it is probably one of the biggest hindrances to a unanimous definition of comparative literature. The fact that comparatists are also educators means that they are under an obligation to justify the courses they offer under the increasing pressure to be cost-effective and to present applied outcomes (see, e.g., Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári). Owing to current economic constraints (which inevitably affect education), modules in comparative literature are increasingly integrated within liberal arts/international studies-type of umbrella curricula which gather learners from different fields. On the surface, this may seem like a good idea, making a virtue out of necessity in the hope that this will allow students to develop a broader mind. However, owing to the limited number of both contact hours and specialized options, this arrangement in effect denies learners the acquisition of any real depth of knowledge (which may constitute another factor for the perceived "woolliness" of comparative literature). The wide span of the comparative field, which is its strength, can be interpreted as a weakness if considered excessive or, practically speaking, too intricate. More worryingly, its interdisciplinary quality also poses a threat since it could justify the eradication of departments of comparative literature on the basis that the subject can be split into elective modules shared by an entire faculty (at least) and belonging to no unit in particular. Declaring, as many academic advertisements do, that comparative literature welcomes all theories, literary and artistic cultures, as well as other sciences to better combine them and examine their points of intersection, can also be used against the discipline. How could it be otherwise when the puzzle that comparative literature presents is not only felt by administrators of higher institutions of learning, but by the teachers of comparative subjects as well? Only an agreed line of action from the comparative community stemming from a clear presentation of and regained confidence in the field can offer the remedy needed to this precarious situation.

Such an undertaking can be activated, for instance by promoting comparative projects involving working together with specialists in other fields (see, e.g., Tötösy de Zepetnek, "Comparative," "The New"). This would ensure the appropriate level of expertise indispensable to the validation of the comparative endeavor. The collective effort would also put an end to the artificial division currently in place between literature and science. It would also resolve the problem of the necessary breadth of linguistic knowledge, often identified as the single most difficult criterion to be met to do justice to a genuinely comparative study. The fact that all participants would bring their own proficiency to team-based ventures would also cancel any possible hierarchy between the various linguistic, cultural, artistic, or scientific areas involved or between types of literary production. It is indisputably in the meeting of specialisms and competences that a place for an objective and productive dialogue can be built. As long as experts with different epistemological and theoretical skills are prepared to collaborate in an intercultural and interdisciplinary manner, the comparative enterprise can take place — not to mention that it would increase chances at obtaining research funding at national and international levels. Lack of institutional support can be crippling, which is why networking has become crucial to the dissemination and sharing of research findings, typically through associations and congresses, but also, increasingly, through professional web pages such as *academia.edu* <http://www.academia.edu> whose motto is "share research." Such links can help identify where complementary activities can be found from early-career researchers to long-recognized specialists and it is in their punctual association that comparative ideas can truly flourish. This may even allow what many consider as a sacrilege, namely the comparative study of one author or even one book. Indeed, as Ed Ahearn and Arnold Weinstein wrote, "the premise that fuels our [the comparative] procedure is that these new constellations of materials shed indispensable new light on the single item" (80). No matter what their premises may be, comparative literature studies can be accomplished successfully if conducted through an organized, ethos-led, variety of perspectives.

Teamwork, of course, implies magnified uncertainty because participants bring with them their fields of expertise, their intellectual and cultural baggage, intuition, and preferences, which, put

together, add unpredictable parameters to the equation. However, we must consider that it is precisely this increased uncertainty that will enable the inquiry to take place through the modification of the rules relating to the use of research tools, increasing their multitextual and transdisciplinary qualities in order to ensure the sustainability of the comparatist material, not restricting it to any particular domain, and allowing it to discover new horizons without invading any, remaining original, innovative, and creative. For this to work effectively it also means that elements of distrust, rivalry, or superiority which exist within and between disciplines must disappear. Only then can comparative literature develop its truly ethical and creative qualities. The presentation of the various aspects found today in comparative literature studies would precisely necessitate a team project to be accomplished impartially. It would indeed be interesting to see what leads different comparative literature ventures today. But, as we have already seen with various "state of the discipline" publications, by the time they are determined, the "new" parameters which have been gathered have already begun to shift. Thus, again, it is not that comparative literature is unstable, but its ethos is rooted in perpetual curiosity and therefore in constant movement of discovery.

If we recall the imaginative element championed by Wellek, this ethos could be captured in one word: creativity, referring both to the study of literary creativity and to the creativeness of those who research and teach it. This would help define both the object and the method of comparative literature without pinning them down. It would also identify the required skills: an ability to imagine, build, and implement new connections, new concepts, and new projects thanks to the originality of the individuals practicing it. This brings us not only back to the principles I identify above, but also to positive uncertainty since creativity is about transforming recognized angles of reflection into new perspectives which are inevitably unexpected and transformative. What is more, for positive outcomes to result from a creative act, one must be prepared to accept not only some amount of uncertainty, but also of unpredictability and even seek a degree of constructive indiscipline. Indiscipline has also been identified before as being profoundly part of the discipline's nature. For example, Peter Brooks described comparative literature specifically as an "undisciplined discipline" (98) expressing his frustration over its lack of definition and David Ferris saw this trait as a positive quality and asked if comparative literature is not "the discipline that eschews definition of itself as a discipline? And is not this resistance to definition the sign of having rejected not just some values but the value of defining values …?" (79). Ferris wrote against the widespread mindset regarding the uncertain nature of comparative literature, which he referred to as "the self-contradictory and evasive rhetoric of our age" (80) and contended that this non-disciplinarity is not a weakness in comparative literature, but on the contrary, that it is its rebellious spirit that is, in fact, its very strength. Interestingly, Chevrel in his 2008 *La Littérature comparée* also refuses to see the comparative idiosyncrasies as weaknesses and he maintains that practicing comparative literature sparks curiosity in the readers' minds, turns them into researchers and even explorers. For Chevrel curiosity is never a fault, but a stimulus. What is waiting to be discovered is, in any literary production, "another way of expressing a feeling, of constructing a plot, of making sense of oneself and of the world … [the comparative approach] obliges us to pay attention to every aspect of a text, especially if it contradicts some received idea" (123). There seems to be a tacit understanding among comparatists that their disciplinary ethos should involve disobedience to the norms, whatever they may be.

In his 2012 *The Promise and Premise of Creativity: Why Comparative Literature Matters* Eugene Eoyang posits that "where other disciplines aspire to order and orthodoxy, comparative literature encompasses chaos and heterodoxy, even against itself" (208). Like Ferris and Chevrel, Eoyang considers that what might elsewhere be viewed as a liability represents a strength and the discipline's source of "vitality, and a manifestation of its continuing self-fashioning" (208). Eoyang takes up the idea of indiscipline and associates it with the notion of creativity and the concept he elaborates — "creative wandering" — leads us to the idea of a long and uncertain journey, which is necessarily aimless to begin with because it brings one towards fresh and random experiments, which will prove positive, fruitful, and creative. Eoyang reminds us that "if we find what we are looking for, there is no discovery, since we are retrieving what we are already familiar with" (193). For Eoyang applying what we already know and understand is not sufficient: discovery demands that we should be unaware and ignorant of what may be found, that the process necessarily unfolds haphazardly while we search for something completely different. Thus he confirms that uncertainty is an intrinsic element of research

and of the discovery of the new and that it brings with it a margin of error. Eoyang relates the notion of error to that of errancy, which he describes as the venturing "away from the safety of orthodoxy and tradition" (195) and considers both error and errancy indispensable in the pursuit of creative research. For him, comparative literature can thus be "enormously fecund" and he declares that he "would rather an unruly, dynamic and disheveled discipline which cannot adequately be defined than a sterile field of study with clear parameters and delimitable borders" and that "because rather than in spite of its waywardness and errancy, [it] generates new ideas, new perspectives, new insights" (202). This view leads him to the idea of serendipity, in other words positive error.

Serendipity is a concept first coined in 1754 by Horace Walpole from a fourtheenth-century text, *The Three Princes of Serendip* (see Hodges). The tale relates the story of three princes who have been sent by their father to travel around the world to acquire knowledge and perfect their life experience. The princes show a special ability to associate chance observations and specific, yet seemingly unrelated events. This gift allows them to make discoveries retrospectively without having sought them methodically. The most famous story is that of the camel of which the princes only see traces, but from which they deduce a wealth of detail about the person with whom the camel was or on the health of the camel itself. However, their sagacity, instead of driving them to the camel, gets them practically imprisoned. The camel was in fact stolen and because they seem to know so much about it, they are accused of its theft. By chance a traveler arrives who bears witness to the fact that he has seen the camel, which allows for the camel to be retrieved, for the princes to be spared and rewarded with presents and titles. The rewards the princes receive were unexpected and unsought and symbolize positive discoveries made by chance and this is the modern sense of "serendipity." The concept has since been developed by scientists to designate the ability to work with the unexpected and to pay attention to surprising facts and interpret them correctly and fruitfully. It developed significantly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries during which important scientific and creative discoveries took place. Serendipity is therefore the result of the implementation of acquired knowledge added to the work of the imagination that combines various elements capturing relations of causality and association.

Sylvie Catellin explored Walter Bradford Cannon's 1945 *Way of an Investigator: A Scientists Experiences in Medical Research* where he lists the conditions which promote scientific intuition, among which are the desire to know, the stock of knowledge related to the question being examined, the feeling of freedom, the ability to break one's routine, the discussion of the problem with other researchers, the reading of relevant articles, and finally serendipity. These conditions reveal a blend of information and understanding around a topic, a degree of self-confidence toward tackling the unknown, and some imagination. Some of these elements of the concept are unsurprisingly close to those I designate as the comparative ethos as they endorse curiosity and open-mindedness. Ahearn and Weinstein have identified as crucial "the creativity, the freedom of comparison" and, for them, "the act of comparison is a liberating act, a shaping venture that ceaselessly reconfigures its materials" (79). With the example of Louis Pasteur and his discovery of penicillin, Cannon illustrated the fact that a chance discovery depends on both the phenomenon observed and its sagacious observer. Pasteur himself declared during one of his lectures at the University of Lille on 7 December 1854 that in observation chance favors only the prepared mind and Catellin adds that "sagacity is on the side of reason whereas chance procures a free space favorable to the emergence of incidental ideas" (78). In the same way, the success of comparative study depends on unplanned discoveries which one makes while researching (all the more so if one is working in a team), but also on the competence, intellectual curiosity, and ability to welcome and wisely use elements of surprise met in the process. According to Eoyang, serendipity opens the doors to critical creativity and encourages researchers to embark on new paths to find answers to new questions which arise during their research. The new questions, in fact, are likely to also be the fruit of the realization that what is believed to be known and understood can still astonish us and that old landmarks can reveal unexpected avenues for discovery.

The following example from "A Simple Heart," one of Gustave Flaubert's *Three Tales*, may serve as an allegory for these ideas. The protagonist Félicité, a maid to whom life has bit by bit refused everything, gets to possess a pet parrot with which she shares a strong bond. One fine day she brings it out of the house, puts it on the grass, and goes away for a second. When she returns, the parrot is

gone. She looks for it everywhere from bushes to roofs, from her street in Pont-l'Evêque to the nearby villages, and from there to neighboring hills. Her panic is such that her mistress thinks she has gone mad. Félicité asks everyone she meets: some think they saw her parrot and send her on a new search, but in the end all is in vain. Exhausted she comes home and sits down when a light weight drops on her shoulder: it is her parrot. In Flaubert's free-indirect speech, Félicité asks herself: "What on earth had he been doing? Perhaps he had been on a tour of the neighbourhood!" (30). The narrative never offers an answer to this question. However, it tells us that shortly after her adventure, Félicité becomes first blind and then deaf. How could this episode in her lifetime of heartaches have such an effect on the character? Could blindness and deafness signify what she has glimpsed, but refuses to acknowledge? Searching for her parrot — the only thing she can call her own — she has taken herself out of her ordinary environment and, becoming disheveled, has run around erratically and beyond her normal boundaries and dared to speak to total strangers. The question she asks — and to which she offers a disproportionately timid answer which can neither soothe her nor satisfy the readers — does not actually concern the parrot, but the character herself. This complete change in her usual cautious and humble attitude — owing to her gender, education, and social condition — has upset her "unprepared mind" (to use Pasteur's term) and the discovery thus remains out of her reach although she has perceived its frightening depth, as becomes evident in her subsequent refusal to see or hear anymore.

The suspended question of the tale is often occulted in various analyses regarding Flaubert's Félicité. Having worked on this text in the past, I had not paid enough attention to this passage either until I began researching the character of the parrot itself. Having moved from France to Ireland at that time, I was working on Franco-Irish literary relations, when I realized that, like Félicité, I had been unprepared and therefore blind and deaf, in my case to another writer, on whom I had already worked a lot, and who had answered Flaubert's protagonist's question in a short story of her own. The author is Elizabeth Bowen and the text one of her first, "The Parrot" (1923). In it her young protagonist who has the charge of her mistress's beloved parrot dreamily lets it escape, and must therefore, like Félicité before her, search everywhere, ending up on her neighbors' roofs, etc., in order to retrieve it before her mistress awakes. She does accomplish this task, but at the cost of her innocence. The discovery she makes about her sex, education**,** and social condition, reveals her dreary life to come. Although she admitted to having read Flaubert extensively (and even attempted to translate his works), Bowen never mentioned that she had deliberately addressed Félicité's question. Instead, she allowed her readers to perceive what she describes as a sense of debt present in all creative writing, and honestly added her own sense of uncertainty to the act of creation: "When I write, I am creating what was created for me. The gladness of vision, is my own gladness, but not at my own vision. I may see, for instance, a … figure coming slowly … But who and how is this? Am I sure this is not a figure out of a book?" (*Collected* 269) The comparative interpretation uncovers the reciprocal radiance of literary texts. I now have a deeper appreciation of Flaubert's tale thanks to Bowen, but I appreciate Bowen equally because I am aware of Flaubert's work. As highlighted by Ahearn and Weinstein: "the comparatist brings to the study of single texts and cultures awareness of other texts and cultures, making it possible to illuminate artistic performances more richly, more variously, more contrastively than is possible in a single field" (79). The collective effort for this illumination of "other" text(s), however, can only be achieved if the stance is from the outset one of openness and humility, which positively accepts to embrace uncertainty as a major component of the ethos of comparativism. Françoise Lavocat writes that "Doubt and epistemological optimism must therefore be associated, not so much in an illusory synthesis but in an instable balance which would maintain disbelief and provoke the actively critical reflexivity which is indispensable to comparativism" and mentions Paul Ricoeur and the tension he identifies between "the hermeneutics of suspicion" and "the hermeneutics of revelation" as inherent to interpretation (<http://www.vox-poetica.org/t/articles/lavocat2012.html#_ftn1>). Lavocat champions defamiliarization as a renewed way of looking at known objects, as a way of examining what is thought to be understood as if it were not. For Lavocat exploration and defamiliarization are complementary and together define the aim of comparativism today because they open new spatial and temporal areas of knowledge.

From the early stages of comparative literature until today, a line of comparatists have believed in an appreciation of literature which works imaginatively, liberatingly, and fairly to all cultures and to

other disciplines in a spirit of discovery and encounter with the "Other" and therefore with humanity as a whole. In conclusion, imagination and its necessary uncertain trajectories are deemed essential to the elaboration of a thorough and honest outcome. For the practitioners who agree with this ethos, there can never be any foregone or permanent conclusion to any study which garners clues to be interpreted serendipitously and whose findings, in the end, reflect the principle of positive uncertainty. As for practical concerns, "Comparative Literature is an academic discipline that no university, as the site of creative intellectual transfer and ideational traffic, should do without … And this, coupled with Comparative Literature's propensity for critical self-scrutiny, goes far toward explaining why our discipline has remained at the forefront of theory for the past fifty years, and also why it has so often been located at the cutting edge of (humanities) scholarship" (Weninger xviii). All subjects and all methods belong to comparative literature provided that, in an objective and dialogic spirit, it aims to identify, assess, preserve, and spread literary creativity as much that of the texts as that of their authors and of the comparatists themselves.

Works Cited

Ahearn, Ed, and Arnold Weinstein. "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time: The Promise of Comparative Literature." *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*. Ed. Charles Bernheimer. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. 77-85.
Bassnett Susan. *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1993.
Boldrini, Lucia. "Comparative Literature in the Twenty-first Century: A View from Europe and the UK." *Comparative Critical Studies* 3.1-2 (2006): 13-23.
Bowen, Elizabeth. *Collected Impressions*. London: Longmans Green & Co, 1950.
Bowen, Elizabeth. "The Parrot." 1923. *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1981. 112-23.
Brooks, Peter. "Undisciplined Discipline." *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*. Ed. Charles Bernheimer. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. 97-106.
Brunel, Pierre, and Yves Chevrel. *Précis de littérature comparée*. Paris: PU de France. 1989.
Brunel, Pierre, Claude Pichois, and André-Michel Rousseau. *Qu'est-ce que la littérature comparée?* Paris: Armand Colin, 1983.
Cannon, Walter Bradford. *Way of an Investigator: A Scientist's Experiences in Medical Research*. 1945. New York: Hafner, 1965.
Catellin, Sylvie. "Sérendipité et réflexivité." *Alliage: Culture, Science, Technique* 70 (2012): 74-84.
Chevrel, Yves. *La Littérature comparée*. Paris: PU de France, 2008.
Damrosch, David. "Rebirth of a Discipline: The Global Origins of Comparative Studies." *Comparative Critical Studies* 3.1-2 (2006): 99-112.
Damrosch, David, Natalie Melas, and Mbongisei Buthelezi. "Introduction." *The Princeton Sourcebook of Comparative Literature: From the European Enlightenment to the Global Present.* Ed. David Damrosch, Natalie Melas, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009. ix-xvi.
Damrosch, David, Natalie Melas, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi, eds. *The Princeton Sourcebook of Comparative Literature: From the European Enlightenment to the Global Present* Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009.
Eoyang, Eugene. *The Promise and Premise of Creativity: Why Comparative Literature Matters.* New York: Continuum, 2012.
Ferris, David. "Indiscipline." *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization.* Ed. Haun Saussy. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2006. 78-99.
Flaubert, Gustave. "A Simple Heart." 1877. *Three Tales*. Trans. A.J. Krailsheimer. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999. 3-41.
Gelatt H.B. "Positive Uncertainty: A New Decision-Making Framework for Counseling." *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 36.2 (1989): 252-56.
Guillén, Claudio. *The Challenge of Comparative Literature*. Trans. Cola Franzen. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993.
Hodges, Elizabeth Jamison. *The Three Princes of Serendip*. New York: Atheneum, 1964.
Juston, John M., A. Kauffeldt, B. Quesada Montano, J. Seibert, K.J. Beven, and I.K. Westerberg. "Smiling in the Rain: Seven Reasons to be Positive about Uncertainty in Hydrological Modelling." *Hydrological Processes* 27.7 (2013): 1117-22.
Lavocat, Françoise. "Le Comparatisme comme herméneutique de la défamiliarisation." *Vox Poetica* (5 April 2012): <http://www.vox-poetica.org/t/articles/lavocat2012.html#_ftn1>.
Le Juez, Brigitte. "'Is the Writer Much More than a Sophisticated Parrot?': Elizabeth Bowen's Reception of Gustave Flaubert." *Revue de Littérature Comparée* 1 (1999): 5-26.
Marno, David. "Meltzl de Lomnitz, Comparative Literature, and Philosophy." *Companion to Comparative Literature, World Literatures, and Comparative Cultural Studies.* Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Tutun Mukherjee. New Delhi: Cambridge UP India, 2013. 100-11.
McClennen, Sophia A., and Henry James Morello, eds. *Representing Humanity in an Age of Terror*. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2010.
Meltzl, Hugo. "Present Tasks of Comparative Literature (1877)." *The Princeton Sourcebook of Comparative Literature: From the European Enlightenment to the Global Present.* Ed. David Damrosch, Natalie Melas, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009. 41-49.

Pellegrino, Margot. "La Dynamique des possibles. Incertitude et durabilité dans les pratiques de transformation urbaine." *carnetsdegeographes.org* 1 (2010): <http://www.carnetsdegeographes.org/carnets_soutenances/sout_01_14_Pellegrino.php>.
Posnett, Hutcheson Macaulay. *Comparative Literature.* London: Kegan Paul, 1886.
Saussy, Haun. "Exquisite Cadavers Stitched from Fresh Nightmares: Of Memes, Hives, and Selfish Genes." *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*. Ed. Haun Saussy. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2006. 3-42.
Saussy, Haun, ed. *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2006.
Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Death of a Discipline.* New York: Columbia UP, 2003.
Todorov, Tzvetan. *La Littérature en péril.* Paris: Flammarion, 2006.
Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven. "Comparative Literature as/and Interdisciplinarity." *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application*. By Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1989. 79-120.
Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven. "The New Humanities: The Intercultural, the Comparative, and the Interdisciplinary." *Globalization and the Futures of Comparative Literature*. Ed. Jan M. Ziolkowski and Alfred J. López. Thematic Section *The Global South* 1.2 (2007): 45-68.
Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven, and Louise O. Vasvári. "About the Contextual Study of Literature and Culture, Globalization, and Digital Humanities." *Companion to Comparative Literature, World Literatures, and Comparative Cultural Studies.* Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Tutun Mukherjee. New Delhi: Cambridge UP India, 2013. 3-35.
Wellek, René. "The Crisis of Comparative Literature (1959)." *The Princeton Sourcebook of Comparative Literature: From the European Enlightenment to the Global Present.* Ed. David Damrosch, Natalie Melas, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009. 161-71.
Weninger, Robert. "Comparative Literature at a Crossroads? An Introduction." *Comparative Critical Studies* 3.1-2 (2006): xi-xix.

Author's profile: Brigitte Le Juez teaches comparative literature at Dublin City University. Her interests in scholarship include reception study, imagology, ekphrasis, geocriticism, adaptation, and ethics in literature. In addition to numerous articles, Le Juez's book publications include *Beckett before Beckett* (2008). E-mail: <brigitte.lejuez@dcu.ie>